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Professional burnout among Catholic religious sisters in Italy: An empirical enquiry  
exploring the protective role of quality of community life

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### **Abstract**

This study set out to examine three questions regarding the prevalence and correlates of burnout among a sample of 194 Catholic religious sisters in Italy who completed the Maslach Burnout Inventory alongside the Big Five Factor model of personality and the Index of Community Satisfaction. Regarding the prevalence of burnout, the data demonstrated that the mean scale scores of these sisters on emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and personal accomplishment all came within the normal range proposed by the test manual. Regarding the personality correlates of burnout, the data demonstrated that the two key personality predictors of higher burnout scores among these sisters were high neuroticism scores and low agreeableness scores. High openness scores also predicted higher personal accomplishment, but were unrelated to differences in emotional exhaustion or in depersonalization. Regarding predictors of community life, after taking individual differences in age and personality into account, higher levels of community satisfaction were associated with lower levels of emotional exhaustion and lower levels of depersonalization, but unrelated to levels of personal accomplishment. This finding suggests that, a good quality of community life among religious sisters may enhance resilience against burnout, while a poor quality of community life among religious sisters may exacerbate burnout.

*Keywords:* Catholic Church, psychology, nuns, psychological wellbeing

### **Introduction**

The notion of professional burnout has both stimulated research and suggested therapeutic strategies among a range of caring or helping professions. This syndrome, considered a possible outcome of stress in certain specific conditions (Del Rio, 1990), indicates, ‘a particular type of reaction to stress which is typical of the so-called helping professions (doctors, nurses, teachers, policemen, lawyers, etc.); i.e. professions where the relationship with the patient, client, or pupil, etc., plays a leading role together with the work in itself’ (Santinello, 1990, p. 47). Cherniss defines burnout, ‘as a process during which a previously engaged professional disengages himself from his work in reply to the stress and tension from his work’ (Cherniss, 1983, p. 3). Maslach (1992), instead, focuses her attention on the situation (over-involvement, heavy workloads, loss of control) and on the relationship (emotional effort of empathy, emotions and tensions, negative focusing on problems), whilst also underlining the importance of personal characteristics (demographic, personality) as features of burnout. She warns that, ‘there is a complex interaction between individual interpersonal and institutional factors and that all these must be taken into account’ even though it is not always clear what the importance of each dimension is (Maslach, 1992, p. 270).

Despite the differences displayed by the various authors, there is a general awareness of it being a multidimensional phenomenon that involves personal factors, factors which are relative to work organization and socio-cultural factors. Burnout may affect not only those involved in the caring or helping professions, but also all those who, to various degrees, encounter ongoing interpersonal relationships characterized by intensity and emotional involvement (Francescato, Leone, & Traversi, 1993). Research has focused on a range of professional occupations (Maslach & Jackson, 1986; Ronco, Fizzotti, & Crea, 1993) and included lawyers (Maslach & Jackson, 1978), policemen

(Burke & Deszca, 1986), educators (Cherniss, 1988; Savicki, 1993), pastors (Daniel & Rogers, 1981), and missionaries (Crea, 1994) as well as housewives (Ronco, Leo, & Fizzotti, 1996). Maslach noted that many situations of life contain elements that can lead to burnout, as can happen for teachers with their students, or mothers dealing with family relationships, or clergy who have to be a source of refuge and support for whoever seeks it at any time and who, in turn, may have no one to turn to when they are faced with personal problems (Maslach, 1992, p. 27-28).

Against this background, the present study concentrates on a specific context of ‘dedication to others’, the dedication of women who have consecrated their lives in religious commitment, who are continuously in contact with people's requests and who dedicate themselves either through their specific professions (medical, teaching, etc.) or outside a structured work organization, as in the case of those involved in community work or pastoral activities (Blanton & Morris, 1999).

### **Burnout among religious sisters**

Some commentators argue that there is a reluctance to talk of stress and burnout among those who have dedicated their lives to religion; it is lay people who get stressed by the number of things that have to be done (Coate, 1989). Those who have dedicated their life to ministry and pastoral activity may be so committed to religious ideals that they are not aware of the risk of getting exhausted. Their dedication is based on very strong religious motivation, and in particular on the theological belief of bearing witness to Christian love in any situation and at all times. On this account, the primary duty of religious men and women in their activities and charitable works is that of dedicating themselves altruistically to people, be it when they exercise their profession by specifically helping others, or when they dedicate themselves patiently to others in the many functions that make up community life or varied pastoral activities (visiting the

sick, helping young people in difficulty), catechesis (the teaching of spiritual subjects), etc. (Crea, 2003; Wispè, 1978). This role is not given them by society, but rather by the intrinsic motivation underlying their vocation of being everything to everyone; therefore, through their dedication, they feel strengthened by their self-description of an altruistic role (Pinkus, 1991). Other commentators recognize that, although their faith is certainly the foundation of their vocation, this does not exempt them from getting tired, feeling exhausted or stressed (Gill, 1980; Kammer, 1978; US Episcopal Conference, 1982; Grosch & Olson, 1991, 2000; Francis, Louden, & Rutledge, 2004).

Based on the assumption that, in all apostolic activity by religious sisters, there is an element of commitment which is profoundly linked to their ideal of religious consecration (Crea, 2001), the present study includes both religious sisters who carry out a professionally-qualified activity outside their religious community, especially in the areas of health (nurses), social assistance (social workers), and education (teachers), and those who work in ecclesiastical contexts equally definable as dedicated, in the more apostolic sense of the word, such as pastors in parishes, chaplains, community formators/animators, and wherever there is emotional and motivational involvement for the good of others (Gill, 1980; Grosch & Olson, 1991).

John Paul II (1996, n. 46) claims that ‘Consecrated persons are asked to be true experts of communion and to practice the spirituality of communion.’ This claim refers not only to the activities of their institutions (schools, hospitals, therapeutic communities) but also and above all to the altruistic spirit to which they are called by virtue of their vocation. This becomes a full-time dedication that comprises a variety of duties. On the one hand, these duties require a personal commitment to respond to others’ needs; while on the other hand, the duties conform individuals to meet socio-institutional expectations. This brings them to live their commitment (be it

professionally qualified or informal) as if in a 'second job' situation, whether in or out of the community. Therefore an apostolic-pastoral dimension is added to their professional job.

These conditions may create an unhelpful set of dynamics. Thus, an excessive workload, in the sense that there are too many requests for the religious sisters to answer, and may cause a sense of extreme inadequacy. Responding to too many requests may generate the feeling that there is no correspondence between the amount of energy involved and the visible results obtained. Then there may be the added difficulty of having to serve in unsatisfactory structural conditions, in which neither the necessary instrumental means nor the autonomy granted correspond to the responsibility that individual religious sisters are theoretically given. Moreover, the vocational commitment typical of religious life may generate additional problems. For example, exhaustion due to stressful work conditions (where it is sometimes difficult to reconcile the requests of professional and non-professional work with the satisfaction of the religious community life) may become even more stressful when there is the added perception of not being able to receive adequate support from the community. At the same time, the structure of the interpersonal network within religious communities may not always be perceived as a source of emotional resource and support from which religious sisters can draw strength in order to deal with the strains arising from the helping activities which the religious carry out.

### **Assessing burnout among Catholic religious**

A small number of empirical studies has begun to chart the level of burnout experienced by Catholic priests, employing Maslach's three component model of burnout as operationalised through the Maslach Burnout Inventory (Maslach & Jackson, 1986).

Maslach's three component model conceptualizes burnout as beginning with emotional

exhaustion. Then, in turn, emotional exhaustion leads to depersonalization and depersonalization leads to lack of personal accomplishment (see Maslach, 2003). According to this account, emotional exhaustion begins to debilitate the individual. As emotional resources are depleted, members of the caring professions feel that they are no longer able to give of themselves at a psychological level. With the depletion of emotional resources, members of the caring profession begin to adopt negative and cynical attitudes toward and feelings about their clients. As a consequence, the tendency toward depersonalization grows and members of the caring professions increasingly view their clients as somehow deserving their troubles. As a consequence of distancing their clients in this way and feeling diminished competence to help them, members of the caring professions increasingly lose their sense of achieving worthwhile things in their work. This leads to dissatisfaction with themselves and to dissatisfaction with their professional role.

The Maslach Burnout Inventory proposes three scales to assess these three distinct components of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and lack of personal accomplishment. In the original form of the Maslach Burnout Inventory, emotional exhaustion is assessed by a nine-item scale. The items describe feelings of being emotionally overextended and exhausted by one's work. An example item on this dimension is, 'I feel burned out from my work.' Depersonalization is assessed by a five-item scale. The items describe an unfeeling and impersonal response towards the individuals in one's care. An example item on this dimension is 'I feel I treat some recipients as if they were impersonal objects.' Personal accomplishment is assessed by an eight-item scale. The items describe feelings of competence and successful achievement in one's work with people. An example item on this dimension is 'I feel I'm positively influencing other people's lives through my work.' In contrast to the other two subscales, lower mean scores on the subscale of personal accomplishment correspond to higher degrees of experienced burnout. Maslach and Jackson



(1986) score the Maslach Burnout Inventory by inviting respondents to evaluate each of the 22 items on a seven-point scale of frequency, from *never*, through *a few times a year or less*, *once a month or less*, *a few times a month*, *once a week*, and *a few times a week*, to *every day*.

The scale properties of the Maslach Burnout Inventory were subjected to close and thorough scrutiny by a number of studies conducted during the 1980s and early 1990s. Reliability and validity have been supported by studies like Abu-Hilal and Salameh (1992), Corcoran (1985), Iwancki and Schwab (1981), Pierce and Molloy (1989), Powers and Gose (1986), and Schaufeli and van Dierendonck (1993). The factor structure has been tested and generally supported by studies like Belcastro, Gold and Hays (1983), Byrne (1991, 1993), Gold (1984), Gold, Bachelor and Michael (1989), Gold, Roth, Wright, Michael and Chen (1992), Green and Walkey (1988), Green, Walkey and Taylor (1991), and Walkey and Green (1992).

The original form of the Maslach Burnout Inventory has been employed in several studies among Catholic clergy, including Crea (2004), Virginia (1998), Raj and Dean (2005), Joseph, Luyten, Corveleyn and de Witte (2011), and Rossetti (2011). Other studies among Catholic clergy have used a modified form of the Maslach Burnout Inventory especially adapted to reflect the experiences of those engaged in pastoral ministry (that also increased the number of items to thirty and scored each item on a five-point Likert scale from agree strongly through uncertain to disagree strongly), including Francis, Loudon, and Rutledge, 2004, and Francis, Turton, and Loudon, 2007.

Using the modified form of the Maslach Burnout Inventory, Francis, Loudon, and Rutledge (2004) reported on findings from 1,468 Catholic parochial clergy in England and Wales. Three main conclusions emerged from this study. The first conclusion drew on the level of endorsement (agree strongly or agree) given to each of the thirty items of the modified instrument. This level of endorsement profiled a group of men who recorded quite

high levels of emotional exhaustion, quite high levels of depersonalization, and very high levels of personal accomplishment.

With regard to emotional exhaustion, over a third of the Catholic priests said that they felt used up at the end of the day in parish ministry (36%). Over a quarter of the Catholic priests found working with people all day was a real strain for them (27%) and felt that they were working too hard in their parish ministry (26%). Around one in five of the Catholic clergy felt frustrated by their parish ministry (22%) and felt emotionally drained from their parish ministry (19%). Around one in six of the Catholic clergy felt fatigued when they got up in the morning and had to face another day in the parish (16%) and said that they felt burned out from their parish ministry (14%). Almost one in ten of the Catholic clergy said that they felt like they were at the end of their tether (10%), that working with people directly put too much strain on them (9%), and that they would feel a lot better if they could get out of parish ministry (8%).

With regard to depersonalization, nearly a third of the Catholic clergy felt parishioners blamed them for some of their problems (31%). Over a quarter of the Catholic clergy recognized that they were less patient with parishioners than they used to be (27%), and that they found it difficult to listen to what some parishioners are really saying to them (26%). One in every six Catholic clergy worried that parish ministry was hardening them emotionally (17%) and almost as many felt they treated some parishioners as if they were impersonal objects (14%). One in every ten Catholic clergy recognized that they did not really care what happened to some parishioners (11%), that they had come to the conclusion that most people cannot be really helped with their problems (11%), and that they had become more callous toward people since working in parish ministry (9%). A significant minority of Catholic priests said that they cannot be bothered to understand how some people feel about things (7%) and that they wished parishioners would leave them alone (7%).

With regard to personal accomplishment, nine out of every ten Catholic priests said that they gained a lot of personal satisfaction from working with people (90%). At least three-quarters of Catholic priests affirmed that, if they could have their time all over again, they would still go into parish ministry (81%), that they felt exhilarated after working closely with parishioners (76%), that they could easily create a relaxed atmosphere with their parishioners (75%), and that they had accomplished many worthwhile things in their parish ministry (75%). At least two-thirds of Catholic clergy felt that they were positively influencing other people's lives through their parish ministry (70%) and that they dealt with emotional problems very calmly in their parish ministry (69%). Three-fifths of Catholic clergy said that they could easily understand how their parishioners felt about things (59%). The proportions dropped, however, to less than one-third of Catholic clergy who felt that they dealt very effectively with the problems of their parishioners (32%) and who claimed to feel very energetic (31%).

The second conclusion compared the mean scales scores of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and personal accomplishment recorded by these 1,468 Catholic priests with the mean scale scores recorded by a comparable sample of Anglican clergymen reported by Rutledge and Francis (2004). According to these data, Catholic priests experienced a higher level of emotional exhaustion and a higher level of depersonalization than was the case among Anglican priests. At the same time, Catholic priests experienced a higher level of personal accomplishment than was the case among Anglican priests.

The third conclusion nested individual differences recorded on the three components of Burnout proposed by the Maslach Burnout Inventory within the three dimensional model of personality proposed by Eysenck and Eysenck (1991). These data demonstrated that higher levels of both emotional exhaustion and depersonalization were associated with low extraversion scores (ie introversion), high neuroticism scores (ie emotional lability) and high

psychoticism scores (ie toughmindedness). Higher levels of personal accomplishment were associated with high extraversion scores and low neuroticism scores (ie emotional stability), but unrelated to psychoticism scores. The magnitude of the correlations confirmed that personality is indeed a key in explaining individual differences in the experience of burnout among Catholic priests.

In a second paper drawing on these same data, Francis, Turton, and Loudon (2007) tested the thesis that companion animals (specifically cats and dogs) may contribute to the work-related psychological health of Catholic parochial clergy and reduce levels of burnout. This thesis was grounded in the considerable literature that has identified social benefits, medical benefits and psychological benefits associated with companion animals across diverse populations. Using multiple regression models to control for individual differences in age and personality, the data indicated that, contrary to expectation, no psychological benefit accrued from owning a cat, while ownership of a dog was associated with statistically significant (but very small) increases in two aspects of professional burnout (emotional exhaustion and depersonalization). These findings were interpreted to suggest that current pressures among Catholic parochial clergy in England and Wales are so great that having a dog within the presbytery adds to the burden rather than providing recreational relief.

While there are some clear advantages in employing the modified version of the Maslach Burnout Inventory designed specifically to take into account the experiences of those engaged in religious professional activities, there are also important disadvantages in so doing. The major disadvantage is that scores recorded on the modified instrument cannot be utilized in relationship to normative data generated by the parent instrument. It is for this reason that the present study proposes to employ the original form of the Maslach Burnout Inventory within a new study of religious sisters engaged in altruistic and charitable activities.

**Taking personality into account**

The finding reported by Francis, Loudon, and Rutledge (2004) that personality scores provide a major key to predicting individual differences in burnout among Catholic priests is consistent with a much broader stream of research. This broader stream of research has employed three different models of personality to explore individual differences in professional burnout among religious professionals.

The first model is the three dimensional model proposed by Eysenck and Eysenck (1991) that suggests that individual differences in personality can be most economically and most efficiently expressed in terms of three higher order orthogonal factors. Eysenck and Eysenck style these factors as follows: the continuum from introversion through ambiversion to extraversion; the continuum from emotional stability through emotional lability to neurotic disorder; and the continuum from tendermindedness through toughmindedness to psychotic disorder. This model of personality has been employed among clergy by Francis and Rutledge (2000), Francis, Loudon, and Rutledge (2004), Rutledge and Francis (2004), Francis, Turton, and Loudon (2007), Turton and Francis (2007), and Francis, Hills, and Rutledge (2008). These studies agree that the clergy most vulnerable to burnout are introverts who also score high on the neuroticism scale, while the clergy most resilient to burnout are extraverts who score low on the neuroticism scale.

The second model is the four component model proposed originally by Jung (1971) and developed by a series of indicators concerned with psychological type, including the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (Myers & McCaulley, 1985), the Keirsey Temperament Sorter (Keirsey & Bates, 1978), and the Francis Psychological Type Scales (Francis, 2005). This model distinguishes between two orientations (introversion and extraversion), two perceiving processes (sensing and intuition), two judging processes (thinking and feeling), and two attitudes toward the outer world (judging and perceiving). This model of personality has been

employed among clergy by Francis, Wulff, and Robbins (2008), Francis, Robbins, Kaldor, and Castle (2009), Robbins and Francis (2010), Francis, Gubb, and Robbins (2012), and Robbins, Francis, and Powell (2012). These studies agree that the clergy most vulnerable to burnout are introverts and that the clergy most resilient to burnout are extraverts.

The third model is the Big Five Factor model proposed by Costa and McCrae (1996). This model proposes five factors generally styled neuroticism, extraversion, openness, agreeableness, and conscientiousness. This model of personality has been employed among clergy by Rodgeron and Piedmont (1998) who found higher levels of emotional exhaustion and depersonalization associated high neuroticism scores, low extraversion scores, low agreeableness scores, and low conscientiousness scores. These findings are broadly confirmed by later studies, including Golden, Piedmont, Ciarrocchi, and Rodgeron (2004), Miner (2007), Galea (2010), and Joseph, Luyten, Corveleyn, and de Witte (2011).

While there are some clear advantages in building on the growing body of research linking professional burnout with the Eysenckian three dimensional model of personality or with the Jungian model of psychological type, there are also two additional advantages in building on the less well used model offered by the Big Five Factor model, namely the novelty of helping develop literature in that area and the opportunity for linking this research with a dominant paradigm within the broader field of the psychology of religion. It is for these reasons that the present study proposes to employ the Big Five model of personality within a new study of religious sisters engaged in altruistic and charitable activities.

### **Community life**

The study of professional burnout among Catholic religious sisters may need to take into account one key issue not relevant for similar research conducted among other professional groups. Religious sisters live within the context of religious communities in which there are clear models and expectations of community life. Such models and

expectations may hold positive or negative implications for work-related psychological health. Two bodies of literature lead to these considerations.

First, general research on burnout (as conceptualized by the Maslach Burnout Inventory) draws attention to the ways in which various forms of social support have distinct relationships with the three components of burnout. For example, early research by Leiter and Maslach (1988) found pleasant contact with supervisors was negatively related to depersonalization, while unpleasant supervisor contact was positively related to emotional exhaustion, and pleasant co-worker contact was positively related to personal accomplishment. Other early research drew attention to two conflicting implications of family life. On the one hand, social support from family members may serve as an important resource building capacity to manage the emotional demands of the caring professions. On the other hand, difficulties in managing boundaries between work and family life may serve as a contribution to emotional exhaustion and to depersonalization (Leiter, 1990; Leiter & Durup, 1996).

Second, research specifically on burnout and stress among clergy and other religious professionals draws attention to the potential benefits of religious community life. For example, in their study of 250 religious leaders, Rayburn, Richmond, and Rogers (1986) draw attention to the finding that religious sisters have the lowest level of stress from occupational environment and also the highest score on total personal resources. They attribute such differences to the beneficial nature of community life.

In order to conceptualize and to measure perceptions of community life within religious communities, Crea (2002) and Baiocco *et al* (2004) developed the Index of Community Satisfaction (ICS). In the first study, Crea (2002) created a questionnaire of 65 items to assess how individuals deal with community conflict and how they view community life as a place for mutual understanding and mutual support. In so doing the questionnaire

measured four dimensions of conflict, namely lack of empathy, interpersonal misunderstanding, communication difficulties, and lack of community ideals. This study demonstrated that good community ideals and a positive view of community life helped to face conflicts. In the second study, Baiocco *et al* (2004) examined the factor structure of these 65 items and selected 11 items that generated a coherent unidimension measure of community satisfaction. Subsequent further refinement of this 11-item index removed one item that demonstrated low item rest-of-test correlations in order to produce the 10-item Index of Community Satisfaction (ICS) that will be employed in the present study.

### **Research questions**

Against this background, the present study has been designed to address three research questions among a sample of Catholic religious sisters in Italy who are themselves engaged in altruistic and charitable activities. The first research question concerns employing the original form of the Maslach Burnout Inventory to assess the overall level of burnout experienced by religious sisters engaged in altruistic and charitable activities. The second research question concerns assessing the connection between personality and individual differences in levels of burnout experienced by sisters engaged in altruistic and charitable activities. The third research question concerns assessing the extent to which overall levels of satisfaction and community life impact individual difference in levels of burnout experienced by religious sisters engaged in altruistic and charitable activities, after taking age and personality differences into account.

## **Method**

### **Procedure**

The data was collected in an ongoing formation workshop conducted with the 'Claretianum' Institute of Theology of Consecrated Life in Rome. The participants completed a 10-page structured questionnaire addressing work characteristics, outcome variables of



burnout, interpersonal variable of community satisfaction, personality variables, and background variables. All surveys were completed anonymously.

### Measures

The background questions concerned demographic information such as age, gender, and race, and it included items to assess primary work setting, position held, and number of years spent in direct service. Other items included percentage of time in specific types of work activities such as individual or group activity.

*Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI).* The MBI (Maslach & Jackson, 1986) consists of 22 statements of job-related feelings that concern emotional exhaustion (EE), depersonalization (DP), and lack of a sense of personal accomplishment (PA). The frequency with which each statement occurs is measured on a 7-point Likert scale, ranging from *never* (0) to *everyday* (6). The emotional exhaustion subscale, consisting of 9 items, is used to assess feelings of emotional over-extension and inability to meet the interpersonal demands of one's work. The depersonalization subscale, consisting of 5 items, is used to measure an unfeeling, impersonal, or even negative response toward the recipients of one's services. The personal accomplishment subscale, consisting of 8 items, is used to assess feelings of incompetence and lack of achievement.

The reliability of the MBI, as reported by Maslach and Jackson (1986), is as follows: test-retest reliability, measured at 2- to 4-week intervals, was .82 for EE, .60 for DP, and .80 for PA; internal consistency, as measured with Cronbach's coefficient alpha, was .90 for EE, .79 for DP, and .71 for PA. The convergent and discriminant validity of the MBI has been demonstrated in numerous studies (i.e., Maslach & Jackson 1986; Rafferty *et al*, 1986). Subscale scores were computed as the sum of the responses made to each item in a given subscale. Burnout is defined by high scores on the EE and DP subscales and low scores on the PA subscale. A relative absence of burnout is characterized by the opposite pattern.

The norms for health care workers reported by Maslach and Jackson (1986) indicate that EE scores less than 19 are classified as 'low', scores from 19 to 26 as 'average', and scores greater than 26 as 'high'. For DP, scores less than 6 are classified as 'low', scores from 6 to 9 as 'average', and scores greater than 9 as 'high'. Lower PA scores reflect greater burnout. Therefore, PA scores less than 34 are treated as 'high', scores from 34 to 39 as 'average', and scores greater than 39 as 'low'.

*Personality.* Personality dimensions were measured with the Big Five Factor Questionnaire, a self-report measure for assessing the basic personality dimensions of energy/extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, emotional stability, and intellect/openness, developed by Costa and McCrae (1996) and adapted in Italy by Caprara, Barbaranelli and Borgogni (1993). The instrument contains 132 items. The subjects used a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*) to indicate the degree to which the item described them. Higher scores indicate a greater degree of each dimension.

*Index of Community Satisfaction.* The ten-item instrument adapted from previous research (Crea, 2002; Baiocco *et al*, 2004) was used to measure social satisfaction and relationships in community. Using a four-point scale, from 1 (*never or rarely*), through 2 (*sometimes*) and 3 (*often*), to 4 (*always*), respondents indicate how often they engage in positive relationships of different content with the other members of the community. Exploratory factor analysis using eigenvalues greater than one and an orthogonal rotation yielded one factor. The Cronbach alpha coefficient for the factor was .85.

## **Participants**

The participants comprised 194 Catholic religious sisters from different parts of Italy who were engaged in a range of altruistic and charitable activities, mainly outside their community, as teachers (18%), nurses (42%), or as social workers (20%). Others were engaged in pastoral ministry or in religious teaching (21%). In terms of educational level, 8%

had completed primary education, 29% had completed secondary school, and 63% had completed university.

### **Data analysis**

The data were analyzed by the SPSS statistical package, employing the frequencies, reliability, correlation and regression routines.

### **Results**

The first stage of data analysis checked the factor structure of the Maslach Burnout Inventory in order to examine its appropriateness for use among Catholic religious sisters. Principal-component analysis (PCA) with varimax rotations identified roughly the same three factor structure as proposed by Maslach and Jackson (1986). The three factors accounted for 42.9% of the total variance. Factors were defined by a criterion of item loadings equal to or greater than .40. The first factor corresponded to EE, with loadings exceeding criterion for all nine of the original subscale items. Similarly, factor 2 identified seven of the eight PA items, and factor 3 included four of the five DP items.

The second stage of data analysis examined the scale properties of all nine measures employed in the study (the three components of burnout, the five factors of personality, and the measure of community satisfaction) in terms of the alpha coefficient (Cronbach, 1951) and the means and standard deviations. These data are presented in table 1

- insert table 1 about here -

Table 1 confirms that the scale of community satisfaction functions with a good level of internal consistency reliability (.84). Three of the Big Five Factors of personality meet the threshold of acceptability of .65 proposed by DeVellis (2003), while conscientiousness almost reaches this threshold (.64) and extraversion fails to do so (.54). In terms of the Maslach Burnout Inventory, the scale of emotional exhaustion achieves a good level of

internal consistency reliability (.81) and so does the scale of personal accomplishment (.74). The short scale of depersonalization, however, is somewhat less satisfactory (.61).

The scores recorded on the emotional exhaustion scale by the Catholic religious sisters ( $M = 21.8$ ) fall within the average range (19 to 26) proposed by Maslach and Jackson (1986). In terms of the individual items, over a quarter of the sisters report that they feel used up at the end of the workday (37%), and that they feel fatigued when they get up in the morning and have to face another day on the job (27%). Between one in five and one in four of the sisters feel that they are working too hard on their job (22%) and that they feel emotionally drained from their work (21%). More than one in ten of the sisters say that working with people all day is a real strain for them (18%), that they feel burned out from their work (18%), that working with people directly puts too much stress on them (16%), that they feel like they are at the end of their rope (12%), and that they feel frustrated in their job (11%).

The scores recorded on the depersonalization scale by the Catholic religious sisters ( $M = 7.1$ ) fall within the average range (6 to 9) proposed by Maslach and Jackson (1986). In terms of the individual items, nearly a quarter of the sisters report that they have become more callous toward people since taking up their job (24%). Over one in ten of the sisters feel that recipients blame them for some of their problems (18%), that they do not really care what happens to some recipients (14%), and that they worry that their job is hardening them emotionally (11%). Almost one in ten feel that they treat some recipients as if they were impersonal objects (8%).

The scores recorded on the personal accomplishment scale by the Catholic religious sisters ( $M = 35.9$ ) fall within the average range (34 to 39) proposed by Maslach and Jackson (1986). In terms of the individual items, over half of the sisters feel exhilarated after working closely with their recipients (67%), feel very energetic (61%), can easily create a relaxed

atmosphere with their recipients (60%), feel that they are positively influencing other people's lives through their work (58%), deal very effectively with the problems of their recipients (55%), and feel that they have accomplished many worthwhile things in their job (53%). Lower proportions of the sisters say that they can easily understand how their recipients feel about things (48%), or say that in their work they deal with emotional problems very calmly (30%).

Since the Index of Community Satisfaction is a relatively new instrument the third stage of data analysis examines this measure in greater detail. Table 2 presents the properties of this instrument in terms of the correlations between each individual item and the sum of the other items, and in terms of the proportion of sisters who endorsed the responses 'always' or 'often' on the four-point frequency. The item rest-of-test correlations show that the eight positively worded items all record correlations above .5, while the two negatively worded items record somewhat lower correlations. In terms of the item endorsement the positive items reveal that the majority of the sisters feel positively toward their community. Thus 78% say that life in their community is positive; 67% agree that the positive aspects of their community far exceed the negative ones; 66% believe that their community is reasonably happy; 65% have received from their community more than they expected; 63% feel that there is harmony in their community; 50% have experienced moments of joy in their community; 48% agree that their sisters understand each other very well; and 39% feel that their community succeeds better than most others. The two negatively phrased items show that nearly two thirds of the sisters recognize that there are differences of opinion among the members of their community (62%), but that fewer than a quarter would go so far as to say that there is dissent in their community (22%).

- insert table 3 about here -

The fourth stage in data analysis examines the bivariate correlations between the five personality factors (extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, neuroticism, and openness), the three components of burnout (emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and personal accomplishment), community satisfaction, and age. Four features of these data (presented in table 3) merit commentary. First, age functions as a significant predictor of one of the three components of burnout (personal accomplishment) and of two of the five factors of personality. Older sisters record lower scores of personal accomplishment, lower scores of agreeableness, and lower scores of openness.

Second, one of the five factors of personality functions as a significant predictor of community satisfaction. Sisters who record higher scores on the scale of neuroticism also record lower scores on the Index of Community Satisfaction. This finding is consistent with the view that individuals who display high levels of anxiety tend to be less content with life in general.

Third, two of the five factors of personality function as significant predictors of all three components of burnout. Sisters who record higher scores on the scale of neuroticism also record higher scores on the scale of emotional exhaustion, higher scores on the scale of depersonalization, and lower scores on the scale of personal accomplishment. Sisters who record higher scores on the scale of agreeableness also record lower scores on the scale of emotional exhaustion, lower scores on the scale of depersonalization, and higher scores on the scale of personal accomplishment. In addition to these consistent patterns across all three components of burnout, openness functions as a significant predictor of personal accomplishment. Sisters who record higher scores on the scale of openness also record higher scores on the scale of personal accomplishment.

Fourth, community satisfaction functions as a significant predictor of two of the three components of burnout. Sisters who record higher scores on the scale of community

satisfaction also recorded lower scores on the scale of emotional exhaustion and lower scores on the scale of depersonalization.

The fifth stage of data analysis recognizes the complex patterns of interrelationships between age, personality, community satisfaction and burnout and employs fixed-order entry linear multiple regression models, with emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and personal accomplishment as the dependent variables, to test whether community satisfaction provides further prediction of burnout, after taking into account individual differences in age and personality. In each of these three separate models, predictor variables were entered in the fixed order of age, extraversion, neuroticism, agreeableness, conscientiousness, openness, and community satisfaction. The key finding from these regression models is that higher levels of community satisfaction are significantly associated with lower levels of emotional exhaustion and of depersonalization, after taking into account individual differences in age and personality. At the same time, after taking age and personality into account, levels of community satisfaction are unrelated to levels of personal accomplishment.

### **Discussion and conclusion**

This study set out to explore three research questions regarding the prevalence and correlates of burnout among a sample of 194 Catholic religious sisters in Italy who completed the Maslach Burnout Inventory alongside the Big Five Factors of personality and the Index of Community Satisfaction. The new data provided by the study illuminates each of the three research questions.

The first research question concerned employing the original form of the Maslach Burnout Inventory to assess the overall level of burnout experienced by religious sisters engaged in altruistic and charitable activities. One recognized way of interpreting scores recorded by the Maslach Burnout Inventory is to locate new studies within the framework proposed by the test manual that defines for each of the three components of burnout a

middle range of 'normal' scores, either side of which are defined 'high' scores and 'low' scores. In terms of all three components (emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and personal accomplishment) the mean scores of this group of sisters were located within the normal range. This finding can be interpreted to indicate that religious sisters engaged in altruistic and charitable activities are not in any sense unusually vulnerable to burnout. Nonetheless, using the range of scores provided in the test manual to identify the proportion of sisters who fell within the category of high scorers identified 22% of the group as recording high scores on emotional exhaustion, 27% as recording high scores on depersonalization, and 35% as recording low scores on personal accomplishment. Data of this nature demonstrate that there are no grounds for complacency among those with pastoral oversight of religious communities. In a sense giving attention only to the mean scale scores takes attention away from those who are far from the mean. The individual sisters who are recording high scores may themselves benefit from pastoral care.

The second research question concerned assessing the connection between personality and individual differences in levels of burnout experienced by religious sisters engaged in altruistic and charitable activities. The data demonstrate that there are two personality factors that are strong and consistent predictors of high levels of burnout among these sisters, namely high neuroticism scores and low agreeableness scores. Moreover these two factors have also emerged as predictors of higher levels of burnout among clergy (see Joseph, Luyten, Corveleyn, & de Witte, 2011). This finding suggests that routine personality profiling of religious sisters may be able to identify individuals most vulnerable to burnout. Appropriately applied profiling could be associated with self-awareness enhancement programmes and other intervention strategies. Studies of clergy employing either the Big Five Factor model of personality (Joseph, Luyten, Corveleyn, & de Witte, 2011) or the Eysenckian three dimensional model of personality (Francis, Loudon, & Rutledge, 2004) have routinely



reported higher levels of burnout among introverts than among extraverts. The fact that this association has not been found by the present study among Catholic religious sisters requires further investigation in order to determine whether this is an aberration unique to the present study or a characteristic more generally associated with those living within religious communities.

The third research question concerned assessing the extent to which overall levels of satisfaction with community life impact individual differences in levels of burnout experienced by religious sisters engaged in altruistic and charitable activities, after taking age and personality differences into account. The data demonstrated that higher levels of community satisfaction are significantly associated with lower levels of emotional exhaustion and with lower levels of depersonalization. This finding suggests that, while a good quality of community life among religious sisters may enhance resilience against burnout, a poor quality of community life among religious sisters may exacerbate burnout.

A significant limitation with the present study concerns the limited number of Catholic religious sisters in Italy among whom the survey was conducted ( $N = 194$ ). As a consequence no attempt was made to explore differentiation among the range of altruistic and charitable activities in which they were engaged. Given that the experiences of those engaged in teaching, nursing, social work and pastoral ministry may well vary, there would be real value in building on the present study among a larger number of participants.

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Table 1

*Scale properties*

	N items	Alpha	Mean	SD
Emotional exhaustion	9	.81	21.8	10.4
Depersonalisation	5	.57	7.1	5.9
Personal accomplishment	8	.74	35.9	8.1
Community satisfaction	10	.86	26.3	4.1
Extraversion	24	.54	70.9	8.2
Neuroticism	24	.81	70.6	11.7
Agreeableness	24	.65	82.2	8.9
Conscientiousness	24	.64	79.0	8.8
Openness	24	.71	78.8	10.3

Table 2

*Index of Community Satisfaction: scale properties*

	<i>r</i>	often %
I believe that our community is reasonably happy	.66	66%
I have received from my community more than I expected	.59	65%
There is dissent in my community*	.49	22%
My sisters and I understand each other very well	.54	48%
I have experienced moments of great joy in our community	.59	50%
There is harmony in my community	.69	63%
Our community succeeds better than most others	.62	39%
The positive aspects of my community far exceed the negative ones	.68	67%
Life in my community is positive	.57	78%
There are differences of opinion among the members of my community*	.27	62%

Note:

\* these items were reverse coded to calculate the item rest of test correlations

 $r$  = item rest of test correlations

often % = the sum of those who responded always or often on the four-point scale of frequency

Table 3

*Correlation matrix*

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Age	-									
2. Community satisfaction	.02									
3. Emotional exhaustion	-.01	-.31***								
4. Depersonalization	.12	-.24**	.50***							
5. Personal achievement	-.16*	.13	.16*	.03						
6. Extraversion	.02	.01	.02	.11	.06					
7. Agreeableness	-.20**	.13	-.23**	-.33***	.21**	.11				
8. Conscientiousness	-.11	.07	.04	-.05	.13	.21**	.27***			
9. Neuroticism	.07	-.40***	.36***	.30***	-.16*	.05	-.29***	-.03		
10. Openness	-.23**	.02	.02	-.12	.21**	.32***	.36***	.35***	-.07	-

Note: \*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < .001$

Table 4

*Regression model*

	$r^2$	increase			$\beta$	$t$	$P$
	$r^2$	$r^2$	$F$	$p <$	$\beta$	$t$	$P$
<i>emotional exhaustion</i>							
Age	.00	.01	0.01	NS	-.03	-0.48	NS
Extraversion	.00	.01	0.13	NS	.00	-0.04	NS
Neuroticism	.06	.05	11.93	.001	.19	2.57	.01
Agreeableness	.07	.05	1.98	NS	.08	1.10	NS
Conscientiousness	.16	.14	20.06	.001	-.24	-3.21	.001
Openness	.16	.14	1.12	NS	.08	1.00	NS
Community satisfaction	.19	.16	6.63	.01	-.19	-2.58	.01
<i>depersonalisation</i>							
Age	.02	.01	2.96	NS	.05	0.72	NS
Extraversion	.02	.01	2.39	NS	.13	1.88	NS
Neuroticism	.13	.12	9.51	.001	.26	3.46	.001
Agreeableness	.13	.11	7.13	.001	.04	0.53	NS
Conscientiousness	.17	.15	7.78	.001	-.15	-2.03	.05
Openness	.18	.15	6.55	.001	-.06	-0.76	NS
Community satisfaction	.19	.16	6.33	.001	-.15	-2.08	.05
<i>personal accomplishment</i>							
Age	.03	.02	5.26	.05	-.11	-1.49	NS
Extraversion	.03	.02	3.15	.05	.02	0.22	NS
Neuroticism	.06	.05	4.04	.01	-.09	-1.13	NS
Agreeableness	.06	.04	3.19	.01	.03	0.42	NS
Conscientiousness	.08	.05	3.08	.01	.08	1.02	NS
Openness	.09	.06	2.97	.01	.13	1.57	NS
Community satisfaction	.10	.06	2.76	.01	.09	1.21	NS